

## Chapter 244 - Fishy Rich

Reishi led Kai to the Captain's cabin, located at the ship's stern, carrying himself with an air of authority. The merman had grown taller, and his angular face gave a more adult appearance.

"Make yourself at home." He closed the sliding door behind them.

The mana density increased tenfold inside. A lacquered desk covered with documents and artifacts used as paperweights took center stage. Detailed nautical maps and vibrant paintings adorned the walls.

*Is this...?*

Spatial Attunement tickled him like static. Kai was pretty sure the cabin looked smaller from the outside. A minute difference, but thanks to his boon, he was confident there was some kind of spatial expansion at play, perhaps even a hidden room.

*This ship must have cost him an arm and a leg.*

He itched to analyze the network of runes woven through the vessel. His skills could pick apart the cloaking to uncover the secrets hidden beneath. Alas, Kai had to curb the impulse in the name of politeness.

"Please, take a seat." Reishi fluttered around the desk, fiddling with an enchanted golden contraption. His dignified appearance vanished in the blink of an eye. "Sorry for the awkward welcoming. There are quite a few legends about sirens, drowned spirits and monsters calling from the water to lure sailors to their death. And it was better if you didn't introduce yourself in front of the crew."

"Oh..." Kai furrowed his brows, unsure what to make of it.

"Tea?" Reishi took out a set of porcelain cups, a teapot and three boxes emblazoned with a delicate painting—all glowing with yellow mana. The golden gizmo turned out to be a glorified water heater. "I've got Dry Autumn River, Winter Passion, and Immortal Sunrise. I need to restock. Which one would you prefer?"

Kai had absolutely no idea what any of those names meant. "Why don't you pick for me? I'm fine with anything."

"Mhmm..." Reishi scratched his neck as if he faced a difficult dilemma. "I think Immortal Sunrise fits your situation the best. It's a mix of Refelia, Teutonja and another dozen herbs found in the desert of the Golden Coast..."

His light blue scales assumed an intense hue. "I'm rambling, aren't I? After you vanished without a word, I didn't imagine I'd see you again." Reishi went to brew the tea with intense focus.

"It's okay. I'm sorry about disappearing." Kai let his gaze wander over the gaudy furnishings, the chair creaking under him. "I was forcibly recruited by the Republic. And things didn't go as planned."

Reishi poured two cups. "You don't need to tell me anything."

"But you deserve an explanation."

"Uh... Is your disappearance in any way linked to military movements in the archipelago?" The merman raised a webbed hand to stop him. "No, don't answer that. I've already got an idea of what happened, and I'd rather maintain plausible deniability. Don't tell me anything."

"Okay..." Kai was somewhat comforted by Reishi's awkwardness. "Reishi, I know we had a deal for my alchemy..."

"Don't mention it, I've already torn up the contract. Though we should probably add a kidnapping clause to any new agreements." He chuckled. "Sorry, bad joke."

"It's fine." Kai blew the steam off the cup and took a sip. A spicy flavor with hints of honey and exotic herbs mixed in his mouth. He could feel the distinct image of a crimson sun rising over golden dunes. "Hmm... it's quite good."

"Of course. This is my private stash." The tea seemed to settle Reishi's nerves, and a genuine smile lit his face. "I'm really glad that you're alive and well."

"Me too. Coming back was uh... *complicated*." Kai didn't know what to say without mentioning the Sanctuary. "You seem to be doing well. Is the ship new?"

"I bought it last year." The merman said with a proud look. "You don't want to spare any expense when traveling across the open ocean, not if you want to make it back in one piece."

"I heard you've expanded your trade beyond the archipelago. How long before you become the richest person on the continent?"

"Don't flatter me. That will require at least a decade." Reishi chortled and jumped into a retelling of his travels. After creating the largest trading company in the archipelago, he had set his sights beyond, though the competition on the mainland was much stiffer.

"Enough about me." The merman poured him another cup of tea. "Have you thought about what to do next? I assume you're still presumed dead by the Republic, and would like to keep it that way?"

“That would be ideal.” Kai nodded. He couldn’t live in Sylspring forever. While no one had said it out loud, his family knew his plans hadn’t changed. “I want to travel to the continent.” The logistics were still nebulous in his mind. He chewed his cheek. “Can you give me a ride there? I can pay, of course.”

The merman shuffled into his seat. “It’s more complicated than you think. The military does random searches of every vessel that enters and leaves the archipelago.”

“Oh... I’ll find another passage.”

“No, it’s okay.” Reishi glanced at the large painting of a meadow beside the desk. “There are ways around the searches, but it won’t solve the problem when you reach the mainland. Almost every city and town requires an identity document to enter and access the amenities.”

*Damn bureaucracy. It always has to complicate everything.*

“Is there no other way to get an ID? Money isn’t a problem.”

Reishi took a sip and peered at him closely. “Are you suggesting I provide you a way to break the law?”

“No, I didn’t—”

Reishi burst out laughing. “I’m just messing with you. You should see the look on your face.” He chuckled again. “If you want to be a farmer or a small artisan in a town, then yes. There are ways to get a document under the counter. But there are few people who have reached Yellow at your age. The higher you climb, the more scrutiny you’ll receive.”

*Why is there never any good news?*

Kai downed his cup, the tea soothing his irritation. “What should I do?”

“Hmm... you can start by not alerting the Republic that you’re still alive. They might not be looking for you now, but if you keep walking on water, someone’s bound to notice. That’s why I didn’t want you to introduce yourself to my crew. The less people know that *Kai* is alive the better. Ideally, you should choose another name.”

*Guess no more growing trees in the courtyard...*

The carefree days with his family were over.

Reishi was right. If the military found out that Kai was alive, they would squeeze him for any information regarding the Sanctuary by whatever means necessary. Even if he could disappear again, it would still put his loved ones in danger.

*Well, thanks to my glorious social skills, I've hardly talked with anyone outside of my family. The killer granny might be the only one who remembers my name.*

Kai had seen her stare down a patrol of guards from across the street. She wouldn't be a problem.

"I'll be more careful." That would earn him time, but it didn't solve the main issue. "Do you know another way to get an ID?"

The merman's crest wobbled down. "There's always someone willing to provide a service if you have enough gold, often unsavory individuals. I can ask around, but this isn't a service I usually provide. I'm sorry I can't help you more."

"You've already been a tremendous help." Kai thanked him sincerely. Reishi was always available to lend a hand, while he had been so utterly unreliable. "I'll figure something out."

If he had survived the Sanctuary, he could find a solution to a tiny hiccup.

*Flynn might have some ideas...*

Kai drummed his fingers on the table. "Actually, there is something else that I need your advice on." He leaned on the mahogany desk to deposit a plain round stone, a wooden box of iridescent dust and a glass bead with Lightning flashing inside. Each item glowed with dense mana at the peak of Yellow. "You see, I've come upon this *stuff*, but I have no idea what they are. Think you can help me?"

Reishi was too busy gawking at the treasures to respond. He extended his webbed hands with sparkling eyes, stopping just short of touching. "Can I examine them?"

"If it isn't a bother."

"Not a bother at all!" Reishi summoned hundreds of mana tendrils, unleashing an arsenal of skills to probe each object with rapt attention. Puzzlement, awe and surprise flashed on his face.

Kai did his best to look indifferent. "Are they valuable?"

"Of course, they'r—" the merman pursed his blue lips. Catching onto the game, he pulled back his enthusiasm and pointed to the rock. "This is a fossilized egg; the parents must have been green beasts or higher. The value depends heavily on the species, but collectors will at least pay its weight in gold."

"This crystal contains living Lightning." He delicately picked up the bead. "It's incredibly rare and hard to use. You can easily sell it for a couple hundred gold mesars. If you find a buyer who knows how to use it, the price can double."

“Can I use it for Alchemy or Enchanting?” Minerals and gems weren't his expertise, but such a high-grade material was bound to produce extraordinary results.

“Among other things, yes. But keep in mind the elemental essence within can kill us both several times over if it breaks. Only a fourth-layer master crafter would be able to utilize it to its full potential.”

*Hmm... I could also pass it along...*

“And lastly, we have this.” Reishi lifted the box of iridescent dust as if it were the Holy Grail. “Astral Dust. It's only found in places with high concentrations of spatial energies, used in all sorts of teleportation and dimensional magic. I'm not even sure how much it sells for. This isn't something that usually reaches the open market. And when it does, it's not sold for gold.”

*Hmm... guess I should have gathered more.*

The wasteland where he found it was plagued by spatial rends. He wouldn't have picked up this much if Hallowed Intuition and Treasure Sense hadn't begged him to.

“Are you interested in buying?” Kai chirped. Gold couldn't buy happiness, but it could make one's life a heck of a lot easier.

The merman watched the treasures with obvious desire. “I told you I'm not certain of their value. And I don't want to take advantage of you.”

*Was he always so sweet? Where did the ruthless merchant go?*

“Then can you help me sell the items I don't need? For a commission, naturally.”

“If you insist... I'll take a forty percent fee.” Reishi gave him a crooked grin. “It'll take a lot of effort to find the right buyers.”

“Deal.” Kai offered to shake, conscious he would stand no chance to sell them by himself.

Reishi looked at his hand, scowling. “You are supposed to haggle. Fine. We can do twenty-five percent.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes, I'm not going to rob a friend. Now, stop tempting me.” Reishi furrowed his hairless brow. “You used to be fun.”

“Thank you. Uh...” He scratched the silver furball that had blinked onto his lap. “Would you like to see the rest?”

The merman looked at Hobbes with a blank face. “Is that a cat?”

“This is Hobbes, but he’s not for sale.” Kai grabbed one of the little paws to wave hi.

“How did he get through the wards? Wait!” His eyes went wide. “You said there is more?”

“Just a few dozen smaller things, most aren’t as good as these ones.” Kai could see a thousand questions crowding the scaly face, but ultimately, he only asked the most important one.

“Can I help you sell them too?”

“If you can identify them. I haven’t yet decided what to keep, but I probably won’t need most of them.”

Reishi wore an enchanted monocle on his right eye and carefully set the three treasures aside to clear the lacquered surface. “This desk is enchanted to prevent items from falling. C’mon, I won’t charge you for the appraisal if you take them out now.” He watched with a pleading look.

*That makes me just want to tease him more.*

Looking at the clutter in his spatial closet, he might have undersold the number a little. Kai began to clear out the space, going by category. The largest share was made up of yellow mana herbs. He would keep most of them for Alchemy, except for the plants with affinities he couldn’t use.

Minerals, ores and crystals could be used for brewing too, though they were wasted with his level of skills. So, he only stored those that could fuel or strengthen an Enchantment.

Beast parts were up next. An eclectic variety of hides, horns, bones and shells. They were by far the easiest to sell and to use in crafting.

*I’ll see if I can craft something with it, there is no urgency.*

Last were various oddities that Kai couldn’t put in any other category. Oddities that his Treasure Sense told him were valuable, but he had no idea how to use, like the Astral Dust.

While Reishi didn’t recognize half the items, he had skills that allowed him to gauge their value and use. His webbed fingers tightened around a snow-white scale, shaking slightly. “This belongs to a green beast.” He stated with absolute certainty.

“Yup. And I want to keep that one.” It was a good memento to remind him there was always a higher peak—and not to mess with scary dragons.

“Ten gold for it.” The merchant offered without blinking.

“Not for a hundred. You know I don’t need money right now.” The desk was overflowing with neat piles of treasures, shining with blinding mana. That was without counting the materials he had already put back into his ring. Kai waited till the scale was reluctantly deposited onto his palm. “And that was everything I’ve got.”

There was technically one more stash made up of the relics he had recovered from the Vastaire sites, but those would raise too many questions. Crafted artifacts wouldn’t be as easy to justify compared to mana treasures.

Reishi didn’t ask any questions. If he hadn’t figured out what happened to him earlier, he surely had by now.

*As long as he doesn’t have explicit confirmation, he can act ignorant of their origin.*

The merman eyed the table with greed and wonder before looking up with a gaze full of seriousness. “Kai, do you trust me?”